

WHERE IS TEIMANAIA'S SKULL?

Known for their great feats of sorcery, the te Aka clan regarded their island home of Banaba (known in modern times as Ocean Island, now part of Kirabati) as the centre of the world. Their oral history is pervaded with the legendary feats of Teimanaia, the great warrior who successfully defended his clan from successive invasions sometime around the 1500AD mark.

In accordance with their *kauiti* (magic rituals), skulls of their notables were preserved and used to enhance rites and rituals. None more powerful than the skull of Teimanaia, said to be larger than all others and exceptionally long-jawed, kept in a *bangota* (ancestral shrine) in the hamlet of Teinangina.

History turned forever here in 1900 when the British Phosphate Company, later the British Phosphate Commission (BPC), began stripping the island of its massive guano deposits in 1900. Over the next 80 years, they excavated and shipped off almost the entire 595 hectare Island to fertilise the paddocks of New Zealand, Australia and Britain. Dr Gould, BPC's medical superintendent between 1918 and 1933, became fascinated with the story of Teimanaia's oversized skull and used a Banaban who worked as a dresser to sneak it away from its repository in Teinangina and deliver it to him.

According to te Aka clan spokesperson Ken Sigrah, co-author (with Stacey King) of *Te Rii ni Banaba (The Backbone of Banaba)* – pub. 2001 by University of the South Pacific, no permissions were ever obtained to take the skull from its *bangota*. He also claims that on his farewell night, Dr Gould allegedly used trickery to get Tekiera drunk enough to take the skull off the island.

It is now believed Teimanaia's skull resides in an American Museum, probably in several pieces as it was on Banaba due to its regular and reverential anointing with oil. The son of the landowner where the skull was kept had a well publicised dream in 1961 where Teimanaia visited him in spirit form, telling him about the removal of his skull to the United States and describing how tears fell from the eye sockets when he heard people say his skull looked like that of an animal.

The lot of Banabans has not been a happy one in modern times: Japanese invaders, continued mining, inadequate compensation and relocation of most to Rabi Island in Fiji. It is easy to see why many Banabans believe that only when Teimanaia's skull is returned to its rightful place will their prosperity return.

Teimanaia's skull may well be sitting in the basement of some museum in the United States. It may likely be labelled as coming from Ocean Island or 'Paanopa', formerly part of the Gilbert and Ellis Island Group, and that it was collected by Dr Gould.

If anyone has any information whatsoever, please contact ...
Ken Sigrah?